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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by the International Council of Jewish Women, the International Federation for Home Economics, the International Federation of University Women and the League of Women Voters of the United States, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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In 1995 girls won their place on the Beijing agenda in section I. of the Platform for Action. Section I. makes a significant pledge to eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girl child, specifically addressing education, violence, economic exploitation and harmful cultural attitudes and practices. It promises to strengthen families and to promote girls' awareness and participation in their own lives and in their societies. Its very existence acknowledges that women's advancement is not sustainable without attention to the rights of girls.

Even previously, in 1994, the Programme of Action adopted by the International Conference on Population and Development declared that the human rights of women and the girl child were an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights.

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Still nothing significant has happened to improve the situation of girls. While we must acknowledge some minimal positive action, the situation of girls has often worsened. Participants in the five-year reviews of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women felt it necessary to reiterate their commitment to action on behalf of girls.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines childhood as birth to 18 years of age, for girls and boys alike. While it is commonly accepted that education to eliminate illiteracy is the most effective means of propelling girls out of poverty and helping them to realize their full potential, developing commonly awareness of problems unique to girls is equally important. For example:

- An increasing number of girls are being infected by HIV/AIDS. In some areas the rates are five times higher than among boys. Given girls' low economic and social status, too often they are vulnerable to unwanted sexual activity and lack access to accurate and adolescent-friendly reproductive health information.

- Gender-based exploitation and violence continue unabated. In stark contrast, the majority of child abuse victims are girls. This includes domestic violence, prostitution, female genital mutilation and unregulated domestic labour.

- The overall health of girls is jeopardized by poor nutrition and more limited access to health care, which leads to stunted growth and nutritional deficiencies such as anaemia. Immunization rates fall far below those of boys.

The picture is disheartening. Between 60 million and 100 million females are missing from the world's population, as victims of gender-based foeticide, infanticide, malnutrition and neglect. Fifteen million girls aged 15 to 19 years old give birth each year, and 64 million girls of primary-school age are not in school. Nearly half of all sexual assaults are committed against girls 15 years and younger, and more than a million of the estimated 10.5 million young people infected with HIV/AIDS are girls.

It is important for us to remember that there are no women's rights without girls' rights and no possible chance for improvement of girls' rights without the diligent efforts of women and men throughout the world.